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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000002

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT, INL, G/TIP, CA/VO/F/P, INR/NESA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [ECON](#) [KFRD](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: [GSL](#) arrests large number of Sri Lankan illegal migrants as part of ongoing crackdown on human smuggling

Refs: 03 Colombo 1343, and previous

(U) Classified by Bruce Lohof, Acting Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In several recent incidents, [GSL](#) authorities have arrested roughly 350 Sri Lankans attempting to illegally migrate to Italy. The [GSL](#) also recently repatriated the last of a large number of third country nationals (all South Asian) who were arrested in mid-2003. At this point, the government appears to be getting something of a handle on the illegal migrant problem. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) LATEST ARRESTS: In three separate incidents, [GSL](#) authorities recently arrested roughly 350 Sri Lankans who were attempting to illegally migrate out of the country. The incidents included:

-- On December 26, off the island's western coast, roughly 30 miles north of Colombo, police apprehended 269 Sri Lankans in a boat. All of those arrested remain in jail pending an early January hearing.

-- On December 1, 63 Sri Lankans were arrested at sea near Negombo town, 20 miles north of Colombo.

-- On November 23, Police interdicted a truck in Negombo carrying 25 people, who were apparently intending to leave the country illegally. The 25 were initially arrested, but were later released. The police are searching for those responsible for organizing the effort.

3. (U) In all three cases, those being smuggled were reportedly headed for Italy. According to the police, the suspected human migrants believed that the Italian government might show leniency to those arrested during the holiday season. According to the police, each individual had paid roughly USD 500 to human smugglers, with a balance of approximately USD 2,300 due upon arrival in Italy.

4. (SBU) REPATRIATION COMPLETE: After a spate of human smuggling attempts of third country nationals in June and July 2003 (see Reftels), C.A. Fonseka, Deputy Commissioner of Immigration and Emigration, told poloff on January 2 that all the foreign nationals involved have now been returned to their country of origin. The majority were released and returned soon after their interdiction. The balance -- some 250 Pakistanis and Indians -- were convicted of attempted human smuggling and sentenced to a year in jail. Given the high cost of incarceration, Fonseka said the [GSL](#) had chosen to return this last tranche to their home countries and all were deported by mid-December.

5. (C) PROGRESS ON ISSUE NOTED: The [GSL](#) appears to have been working hard to prevent human smuggling. In recent months, a number of the smuggling organizers have been arrested and their rings broken up. When queried, Fonseka said he felt that the successful effort by Sri Lankan law enforcement in preventing the large-scale human smuggling attempts in June/July had had a notable impact on the smugglers and their operations. The [GSL](#) continued to remain vigilant, but had not detected any additional smuggling attempts involving third country nationals in the past several months. Fonseka added that he hoped that those repatriated were delivering the message to compatriots that the Sri Lankan authorities were tough on human smuggling and that Sri Lanka was not the place to attempt such activities.

6. (C) COMMENT: The government appears to be taking the matter of illegal migration extremely seriously. As the problem spiked in mid-2003, the [GSL](#) closely cooperated with local embassies and launched a crackdown, which, as noted, appears to have had some success. That said, with SAARC visa entry procedures liberalized and the number of flights linking South Asian points gradually expanding, the [GSL](#) will have to keep on top of the situation.

17. (C) COMMENT (continued): As for potential Sri Lankan illegal migrants, it is a sad commentary that so many are willing to risk life and limb trying to get to Europe illegally despite the peace process and economic growth at home. In the meantime, although the impasse has not seemed to have any negative impact as of yet, it is possible that further cohabitation conflict could undermine GSL efforts in this area. This is especially the case in light of lingering confusion over exactly who is in charge of the Internal Security (formerly Interior) Ministry. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD